

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

Place, Pragmatics and Postcolonial Discourse

Levisen, Carsten

2020

Levisen , C & Sippola , E 2020 , ' Place, Pragmatics and Postcolonial Discourse ' , Journal of Postcolonial Linguistics , vol. 2020 , no. 2 , pp. 1-7 . <
<https://iacpl.net/jopol/issues/journal-of-postcolonial-linguistics-22020/place-pragmatics-and-postcolonial-discourse/>
>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/317844>

unspecified
publishedVersion

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Please cite the original version.

Place, Pragmatics and Postcolonial Discourse

Carsten Levisen

Roskilde University
calev@ruc.dk

Eeva Sippola

University of Helsinki
eeva.sippola@helsinki.fi

1. The Primal Fact of Place

This special issue explores the ways in which “place” is construed and enacted in colonial and postcolonial discourses. “Place” is a key concept in human meaning-making and a core theme in the discourses of colonialism. From public deliberations about geopolitics to small-scale everyday interactions in the streets, the concept of place is prominent and salient. Speakers have built elaborate notions from it, such as *countries* and *cities*, *ice caps* and *oceans*, *train stations* and *town squares*. In different linguacultures speakers have coined, developed, and elaborated numerous culturally-specific concepts of “place”, many of which are locally prominent and difficult to translate. For these same reasons, meaning-making in specific places and about specific places is negotiable and often contested. With postcolonial pragmatic case studies from diverse settings, the contributors to this issue explore “place” from highly local sites, exploring a variety of topics, including *the importance of country* in Aboriginal Australia, the discourse of Buenos Aires as the *París de Sudamérica* ‘Paris of South America’, innovative use of deixis among former wage labourers of *fincas* in postcolonial Guatemala, fluid linguistic practices of young speakers in urban spaces of *Maputo*, stories told at a *tavern* in South Africa, and playful linguistic masquerades in the Bakuli neighbourhood of Kampala, Uganda.

Complex terms such as “localities” and “spatialities” abound in academic jargon, but even such abstractions depend conceptually on the more grounded concept of “place”. In Anglophone academia, “place and space” are often mentioned together, as if they naturally belonged together. Philosopher Edward S. Casey, who traced the neglect of “place” in favour of “space” in the Western philosophy, opens his book *The Fate of Place* by accentuating the “primal fact of place”:

“Whatever is true for space and time, this much is true for place: we are immersed in it and could not do without it. To be at all—to exist in any way—is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place. Place is a requisite as the air we breathe, the ground on which we stand, the bodies we have. We are surrounded by places. We walk over and through them. We live in places, relate to others in them, die in them. Nothing we do is unplaced. How could it be otherwise? How could we fail to recognize this primal fact?”
(Casey 1997: ix)

Ethnographers of communication, Donal Carbaugh and Tovar Cerulli reached similar conclusions, saying that “each of us from the beginning, now and forever more will be enplaced somewhere, not just anywhere” (2013: 3), and that “place is profoundly basic

and specific as we learn and study who and where we are” (2013: 4). The understanding of place as primal is supported by cross-linguistic work suggesting that “place” seems to be lexicalized across languages. Semanticist Anna Wierzbicka has long held “place” (with the variant “where”) to be a semantic prime, i.e. as an ultimately simple, and cross-translatable concept (1996: 58). In comparison, “space” is a rather hard-to-translate idea, which might have counterparts in (many) European languages, but not necessarily across the world’s languages (Wierzbicka 1996, 2013). One of the other central facts about place is that it often attracts “we”-discourse. Place-belonging, place-naming, and memories of place are often couched in a discourse of specific “we-s” in the form of a socially, culturally, and linguistically defined groups. The connections between “places” or “we-s” might be thought of as ancient or transient, but place-based studies of language-in-context appear to attract discourses of belonging and social cognition. Endorsed by words and grammar, the link often lies manifest in linguacultural discourses of place. Consider for instance the Melanesian creole discourse of *ples* with the salient construction *ples blong X* ‘group X’s place’, such as e.g. *ples blong yumi* ‘our place, the place of all-of-us’, or the concept of *manples* ‘people of the place’ (see e.g. Levisen 2017; Levisen & Priestley 2017, for Austronesian perspectives on place, see also Fox 1997).

Place, with its translingual appeals and transcultural resonance, offer pragmatics and postcolonial linguistics a meeting point. The postcolonial pragmatics of place allow for in-depth case studies of places and their people, and people and their places. It allows for the study of we-discourse in relation to place— “our” claims to places, “our” dreams of places, and “our” lives in and with place.

2. Place in Pragmatics

While “place” matters greatly to speakers, and while cultural and situational contexts are profoundly shaped by “place”, it would be hard to say that the salience of “place” is reflected in linguistic pragmatics. In fact, universally-oriented theories of pragmatics have often consigned place to the background scenery. With the advent of Postcolonial Pragmatics (see e.g. Anchimbe & Janney 2011; Schubert & Volkmann 2016), Ethnopr pragmatics (Goddard & Ye 2015), Cultural Discourse Analysis (Carbaugh 2016), and other place-sensitive approaches to the study of language-in-context, “place” is gradually gaining the theoretical prominence it deserves.¹ Arguably, the concept of place is important for the study of meaning-making. Grounded in shared human experience, “place” allows us to study the concreteness of everyday life and language, and the discursive logics that unfold among people in places and the “we” of the place.

Universal pragmatics has been criticized for its heavily Anglocentric models that have tended to frame speakers as free-standing individuals who “do things with words” in order to achieve certain outcomes (for criticisms see Leezenberg 2010; Levisen & Waters 2017). Critiques have often focused on the “cultural lacks” of universalist theories (see e.g. Goddard & Ye 2015). However, it is not only the concept of “people” that needs to be drawn into the contextual study of language, so too does the concept of “place”. For it is

¹ As a parallel development, the discipline of sociolinguistics has recently seen a renewed interest in ‘place’ (see Cornips & de Rooij 2018 for an overview).

not only people who have agency. “Places” have agency too, in the sense that they allow certain discourses. Place can elicit speech rather than simply accompany speakers’ words. Place can entice speakers to act, think, feel, and talk in certain ways, and similarly, to not act, to not think, to not feel, and to not talk. In the context of colonialism, place can be highly agentive, creating and maintaining ideas about sociality, belonging, norms and power relations.

3. Analysing discourses of place

Place drives a broad array of discourses, from stories of place and song lyrics to signage in the city and talk in the street.² From the micro-scalar perspective of place-based interaction rituals to the macro-scalar view of emerging linguacultures that for centuries have nurtured specific epistemes of place, the pragmatics of place offers a meeting place for interactionists with an interest in situations and for scholars of linguacultures with an interest in linguistic worldviews.

There are multiple ways of approaching the discourses of place, but in the following we will focus on five particularly promising approaches: studies in the keywords of place, place-naming, place-based repertoires and registers, place-based cultural scripts, and place-driven ideologies of language.

3.1. Keywords of place

Keywords are words around which whole discourses are organized and revolve. Often highly culturally-specific, they offer the researcher “emically” salient perspective on discourse. Keywords of place can refer to real, virtual, or mythical places. They are often taken-for-granted and viewed as natural by the speakers who live by these words. English keywords of place include geopolitical concepts such as *countries*, *nations*, *cities*, and *oceans*; they are words which in global comparison often do not have precise translational counterparts, if any counterparts at all (see Bromhead 2018; Goddard, this issue). From the postcolonial-pragmatics perspective, keywords are useful for denaturalizing dominant discourses of place, through the examination of taken-for-granted concepts in discourse. Comparative keyword studies offer a way of bringing together perspectives from both keywords of dominant discourses and alternatives from the words and conceptions from linguacultures outside of the hegemonic “Anglo” (or European) words and views of the world.

3.2 Place-naming

Places with a special prominence are likely to be named, and the toponymy of *beaches*, *squares*, *nations*, and *oceans* is imbued with stories about belonging, imagined pasts, and imagined presents. Place names can also be both virtual, or mythical, as evidenced by names such as *Babylon*, and *Terra Australis Incognita* (Levisen 2017; Habib 2018), and spiritual worlds have can have whole geographies with named kingdoms (Storch 2017a). The study of toponomastics in colonial contexts has been an important part of

² In sociolinguistics, and in the sociology of language, studies in linguistic landscaping have now become well established (for early perspectives, see Landry & Bourhis 1997).

postcolonial linguistics (Stolz & Warnke 2018). In the same vein, the study of toponomastic metapragmatics, in which the names of *streets*, *towns*, and *museums* are explicitly discussed, are important for understanding the feelings, values, and discursive struggles which unfold within particular groups of stakeholders, activists, and pundits (see also the papers in Bigon 2016; Ainiala & Östman 2017).

3.3 Place-based repertoires and registers

Place-based registers and repertoires are ways of speaking associated with the communication “in” or “about” a specific locale (see e.g. the papers in Warnke & Busse 2014). Repertoires can be viewed as the semiotic resources of speakers and registers the skills in using a specific subset of language for specific social—and spatial—situations (Pennycook 2018; on youth language, see Kerswill 2013). Registers include e.g. specialized jargons, knowledges about taboos, secret languages (e.g. Schwegler & Rojas-Primus 2010; Storch 2017b), or the politically prestigious registers of educational, legal, and medical language (see e.g. Schubert & Sanchez-Stockhammer 2016). Story-telling is a socially prestigious register, and the repertoires of story-tellers seem important for the postcolonial pragmatics of place (see Kelleher, this issue).

3.4 Place-based cultural scripts

Cultural scripts are the norms, logics, and unwritten rules that undergird speech practices and rituals. Scripts are often proscriptive or prescriptive in their orientation, providing speakers with social and cognitive anchors “good and bad” and for “dos and don’ts” (Goddard & Ye 2015). The cultural script approach seems to have at least three applications for the pragmatics of place. Firstly, it allows for the articulation of local norms and logics, under the headline of “(many) people here think like this”. Secondly, the approach allows for articulating place-sensitive logics, spelling out how people should feel, act, think and speak “when they are in this place X, Y, Z”. Thirdly, the script approach can articulate “knowledges” of place, be that epistemes of environment, spirituality, or cultural significance within specific linguacultural groups.

3.5 Place-based ideologies of language

Language ideologies are conceptualizations about speech practices and speakers, the study of which often includes both cultural and political elements (Woolard & Schieffelin 1994). Arguably, “place” was central for European discourses of colonialism, as well as for contemporary neo-colonial forces. Current discourses of immigration and displacement are all entangled with ideologies of language, and so is the discourse formation of nationalism and patriotism (e.g. Blommaert & Verschueren 1992). Postcolonial discourses on land rights, independence, language revitalization and the decolonization of curricula, literacy practices and educational ideas, are also often driven by certain ideas of “place”.

4. This issue

From a variety of perspectives, and with original case studies from the Americas, Africa, and Australia, the contributors of this special issue develop new analyses of the entanglement of place, people, and words.

Cliff Goddard's paper '*Country*', '*land*', '*nation*': *Key Anglo English words for talking and thinking about people in places* takes issue with the discourse formations of "Anglo English", a short hand term for the most prestigious kind of English which is associated with the political Anglosphere (USA, Britain, Australia, etc.). Combining corpus analysis with keyword studies and conceptual analysis, Goddard explores the networks of meaning associated with the three geopolitical keywords of public and political discourse, 'country', 'land', and 'nation'. Shifting perspective, Goddard then develops an account of the word *country* in Aboriginal English, whose meaning is tied to a different geopolitical and emotional episteme of place. Applying the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) approach as his overall conceptual framework, Goddard provides a high-resolution analysis of geopolitical words and the associated views of the world.

Jan Hein explores the construals of place in Porteño Spanish, providing both cultural scripts for common attitudes and semantic explications for core expressions of Argentine discourses of the nation-state. With two prominent phrases as his starting point, *Buenos Aires es la París de Sudamérica* 'Buenos Aires is the Paris of South America' and *Los argentinos descienden de los barcos* 'Argentines descend from the ships', Hein examines colonial ideas and imagery. Using a combination of the NSM approach and Conceptual Blending Theory, Hein develops a fascinating account of the Europeanization of Argentina and how Europeanizing narratives, analogies, and knowledges have been established and maintained.

Torun Reite studies "ex-colonial language spread from below" in the context of urban Mozambique. Studying urban spaces in and around Maputo, Reite details the linguistic ecology and language dynamics that exist between the former colonial language Portuguese and local languages. "Spaces of intimacy" and "places of dwelling" are of particular interest, as Reite explores emerging repertoires, the social functions of language use, and the fluidity of multilingual practices. In the analysis, a combination of census data and linguistic-ethnographic diaries of young Mozambicans are used to provide a new account of the complex linguistic and social situation for urban youth in Maputo.

Rita Vallentin investigates place-belonging and place-making in postcolonial Guatemala. Conducting research with a rural community, which historically grew out of a Ladino-owned *finca*, Vallentin's work centres on the social meaning of deixis, in particular the important role played by the deictic adverb *aquí* 'here' which has come to play a central role in the community. *Aquí* has been refunctionalized, morphing into an expression of belonging. The paper provides a captivating example of how belonging can be captured in place-based ways, rather than traditional ethnicity-based social categorizations. It calls for approaches to pragmatics that are ethnographically informed and grounded in speaker-centred views as well as sensitive to local meaning-making.

William Kelleher studies *Narrative iteration and meaning making in a Johannesburg tavern*. Focused on site-based research and the practice of iterative story-telling, Kelleher

pays special attention to spatio-temporal coordinates and interactional positioning in the retelling of stories. The narrative in question is told in a Johannesburg tavern *The Brazen Head*, in different settings. Informed by studies in orientalism, Kelleher explores a narrative that revolves around events in the Middle East and provides an analysis that encompasses episodic, structural, and interactional components. The paper develops an analysis of the temporal indexicalities, values and social meaning of narrative, contributing to the pragmatics of place.

Nico Nassenstein takes us to bus stations and strip bars in Bakuli, a neighbourhood in the Ugandan capital Kampala, where belonging and transient socialities are negotiated anew among traders, travellers, and refugees. Exploring the intersection of pragmatics and sociolinguistics in the Kinyarwanda-Kirundi language continuum, Nassenstein's case study shows how the pragmatics of Bakuli is characterized by play, trickery, and masquerade, which affords and allows an unmaking of colonially defined language borders and language ideologies. The paper contributes with new perspectives on the relationship between speakers and place and on the way in which highly local linguistic repertoires and practices can subvert national indexicalities.

References

- Ainiala, Terhi & Jan-Ola Östman (eds.). 2017. *Socio-onomastics: The pragmatics of names*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Anchimbe, Eric & Richard W. Janney. 2011. Postcolonial Pragmatics: An introduction. *Journal of Pragmatics* 43(6). 1451–1459.
- Bigon, Liora (ed.). 2016. *Place Names in Africa: Colonial urban legacies, entangled histories*. New York: Springer.
- Blommaert, Jan & Jef Verschueren. 1992. The Role of Language in European Nationalist Ideologies. *Pragmatics* 2(3). 355–375.
- Bromhead, Helen. 2018. *Landscape and Culture: Cross-linguistic perspectives*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Carbaugh, Donal & Tovar Cerulli. 2013. Cultural discourse of dwelling: Investigating environmental communication as a place-based practice. *Environmental Communication* 7(1). 4–23.
- Carbaugh, Donal. 2016. Cultural Discourse Analysis: Pragmatics of social interaction. In Alessandro Capone & Jacob Mey (eds.), *Interdisciplinary Studies in Pragmatics, Culture and Society: Perspectives in Pragmatics, Philosophy & Psychology* 4, 556–580. Springer: Cham.
- Casey, Edward S. 1997. *The Fate of Place: A philosophical history*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cornips, Leonie & Vincent A. de Rooij. 2018. *The Sociolinguistics of Place and Belonging*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Fox, James J. (ed.). 1997. *The Poetic Power of Place: Comparative perspectives on Austronesian ideas of locality*. Canberra: Department of Anthropology, Australian National University.
- Goddard, Cliff & Zhengdao Ye. 2015. Ethnopragmatics. In Farzad Sharifian (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Culture*, 66–83. London & New York: Routledge.

- Habib, Sandy. 2018. Heaven and Hell: A cross-linguistic semantic template for supernatural places. *RASK* 48. 1–34.
- Kerswill, Paul. 2013. Identity, Ethnicity and Place: The construction of youth language in London. In Peter Auer, Martin Hilpert, Anja Stukenbrock & Benedikt Szmrecsanyi (eds.), *Space in Language and Linguistics: Geographical, interactional, and cognitive perspectives*, 128–164. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Landry, Rodrigue & Richard Y. Bourhis. 1997. Linguistic Landscape and Ethnolinguistic Vitality: An Empirical Study. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 16(1). 23–49.
- Leezenberg, Michiel. 2010. Griecan and Confusian Pragmatics: A contrastive analysis. In Dingfang Shu & Ken Turner (eds.), *Contrasting Meaning in the Languages of East and West*, 3–32. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Levisen, Carsten. 2017. *Pragmatics in Paradise: Keywords of Place in Postcolonial Vanuatu*. Paper presented at the 15th International Pragmatics Association Conference, Belfast, July 21, 2017.
- Levisen, Carsten & Carol Priestley. 2017. Keywords in Postcolonial Melanesian Discourse: Kastom ‘traditional culture’ and tumbuna ‘ancestors’. In Carsten Levisen & Sophia Waters (eds.), *Cultural Keywords in Discourse*, 83–106. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Levisen, Carsten & Sophia Waters. 2017. How Words do Things with People. In Carsten Levisen & Sophia Waters (eds.), *Cultural Keywords in Discourse*, 1–23. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Pennycook, Alastair. 2018. Repertoires, Registers and Linguistic Diversity. In Angela Creese & Adrian Blackledge (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Superdiversity*, 3–15. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Schubert, Christoph & Christiana Sanchez-Stockhammer. 2016. *Variational Text Linguistics: Revisiting register in English*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Schubert, Christoph & Laurenz Volkmann. 2016. *Pragmatic Perspectives on Postcolonial Discourse*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Schwegler, Armin & Constanza Rojas-Primus. 2010. La “lengua” ritual del Palo Monte (Cuba): Estudio comparativo (Holguín/Cienfuegos). *Revista Internacional de Lingüística Iberoamericana* 15. 187–244.
- Stolz, Thomas & Ingo Warnke (eds.). 2018. *Vergleichende Kolonialtoponomastik. Strukturen und Funktionen kolonialer Ortsbenennung*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Storch, Anne. 2017a. *The Place Inside: Spatial Discourse in Spirit Possession*. Paper presented at the 15th International Pragmatics Association Conference, Belfast, July 21, 2017.
- Storch, Anne. 2017b. Typology of Secret Languages and Linguistic Taboos. In Alexandra Aikhenvald & R. M. W. Dixon (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Linguistic Typology*, 287–322. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Warnke, Ingo H. & Beatrix Busse (eds.). 2014. *Place-Making in urbanen Diskursen*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Wierzbicka, Anna. 1996. *Semantics: Primes and Universals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wierzbicka, Anna. 2013. *Imprisoned in English: The hazards of English as a default language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Woolard, Kathryn A. & Bambi Schieffelin. 1994. Language ideology. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23. 55–82.